

AVIATION SECURITY IS LAW ENFORCEMENT:

Responding to GOP Myths

As the conference begins on aviation security, it is important to remember the critical arguments in favor of genuinely overhauling America's failed aviation security system. While House Republicans continue to try and mislead the public and delay real action, Democrats need to drive home the point that America needs to put aviation security into the hands of federal law enforcement officers.

If you want to professionalize aviation security, you have to pay security officers like professionals. GAO reported last year that turnover rates for screeners range from 100 to over 400 percent. Reasons for the high turnover include low wages (according to GAO average wages range from \$5.25 and \$6.75 per hour) and limited benefits. In Europe, screeners are well paid (starting with pay roughly three times more than American screeners), have vacation and sick leave, and retirement and extensive health benefits. Under the bi-partisan Senate bill, screeners would get these same kind of benefits by becoming government employees. Under the House Republican plan, screeners are still left with no guarantee of any new leave, health or retirement benefits and only vague predictions that screeners will eventually get modest hourly wage increases.

Israel has the world's best air security and uses government employees. Despite a widespread disinformation campaign, the fact is Israel uses only government employees to screen passengers in Israel. Almost all baggage screening is done by government workers, except a handful of technicians. Only in overseas locations where they cannot find enough Israeli citizens to hire as Israeli government aviation security officers do the Israeli's allow private companies to perform passenger screening.

Europe has also had problems with private screeners. Even after the September 11th attacks, private screeners at London's Heathrow Airport knowingly allowed a nine inch knife onto an American bound flight, and over 38 security staffers were working at Heathrow without going through required background checks.

European screeners also have unacceptably high screening failure rates. Last year, GAO conducted a study comparing the performances of U.S. screeners to screeners at a European airport. While the study documented the fact the European screeners caught twice as many threatening objects as their American counterparts, the private European screeners still missed well over one out of three dangerous items. In America, getting less than 65% on a test is usually graded an "F".

European countries privatized screening to save money, not because it's better. GOP Whip Tom DeLay has repeatedly claimed that Europe stopped using government employees to do screening because government employees were not as good as private screeners. THAT IS NOT TRUE. The decision to privatize most screening jobs was made to cut costs at a time of increasing price competition in international aviation and tighter government budgets.

Switching to private screeners did not improve aviation security. DeLay also falsely argues that Europe's switch to private screeners led to a major drop in hijackings. The truth is hijack attempts dropped dramatically after the 1970's, so therefore the number of hijackings dropped. Even in the United States, where no significant changes were made in aviation security, hijackings dropped from nine in the 1970's to only one in the 1990's.

The U.S. aviation system is too big and complex for the government to effectively oversee multiple, private security contractors. European countries have fewer airports and much smaller numbers of screeners. Government oversight to make sure security is consistent and assured is much easier to perform. The U.S. has over 450 commercial airports, almost 30,000 aviation security employees and a very high threat level of future terrorist attacks. Requiring the government to then try and coordinate security through multiple private companies with various levels of expertise and management skill – and all of who will be motivated to try and squeeze out a profit out of this situation – cannot possibly further the goal of safeguarding aviation.